



Appropriations Committee Public Hearing on:

House Bill 5037 AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2023

February 24, 2022

Good Evening Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Heather Gates, President/CEO of Community Health Resources. CHR is one of Connecticut's largest and most comprehensive behavioral health, housing, foster care, and primary care providers. We employ over 900 individuals throughout CT.

CHR is a Local Mental Health Authority and CT's first CCBHC. DMHAS contracts with us to provide a system of services to support and treat adults with serious mental illness and substance use disorders. We carry immense responsibility and have a deep and abiding commitment to those with the most challenging conditions living in the community. This commitment has not wavered for the past two years and in fact has deepened further as we have seen the impact of the pandemic on those whom we serve. Our staff have also been impacted by the pandemic in all aspects of their lives.

I want to thank you for the 4% Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) that you fought to include in last year's budget. It was critically important to helping us provide much needed salary increases for all of our staff. They have been on the front lines of the pandemic taking care of those most in need. I am here tonight to ask you to honor the long-term plan to address the underfunding of behavioral health and increase it by an additional 8%. We are in desperate need of this funding to decrease the turnover rate of our staff and fill vacant positions. Our turnover rate is 18%. We have 41 clinician vacancies in our adult programs alone. System wide we have 200 openings for permanent and temporary staff.

Throughout the pandemic we have given our staff hazard pay, increased salaries by as much as 14%, and absorbed increased health insurance costs. We recently distributed raises to our staff and the gap between the funding received and the money we spent is \$730,000. In addition, inflation rose by almost 6% and this is having an impact as well. We need consistent and sustained funding from DMHAS to support our programs. I cannot overstate that the mental health and substance use system is in a crisis.

We have a dedicated work force but when other providers can offer higher salaries to our clinicians, it is a tough choice for them. Ten years of underfunding has left us vulnerable and unable to meet the demand for higher salaries. Residential staff are offered higher salaries by Target, Walmart, and countless others. In no scenario is this acceptable. The state of CT must do better. Our staff and those whom we serve deserve better.

We are in full support of the new initiatives in the DMHAS budget but as you consider where to direct funding, please stabilize the existing service system as well as funding new initiatives. Many of the proposals put forth in the budget are excellent ones but the foundation of the system needs to be stabilized before proceeding with them.

We deeply appreciate all that you do to stand up for us in the budget process as do our staff and those whom we serve. We have been here every step of the way over the last two years and need your help.